WHAT WILL YOU DO WITH THE REST OF YOUR LIFE?
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Psalm 139:1-10
Mark 1:14-20
Jonah 1:1-17

"The word of the Lord came to Jonah . . . ,
saying 'Go to Nineveh, that great city.'
Jonah 1:1 (NRSV)

Lance Armstrong is a remarkable human being and one of the great athletes of our time. His sport is cycling, World Class, Olympic cycling. Tour de France cycling. It is a grueling, lonely sport requiring total physical, mental, and spiritual devotion. Lance Armstrong is better at it than anybody else, winning the Tour de France consecutive years in 1999, 2000, 2001, and 2002. Yet prior to that, in 1996, this even-then world-class cyclist was diagnosed with testicular cancer and began a long, arduous regimen, which included three surgeries, three incredibly difficult months of chemotherapy, and what he calls "a year of hell." Armstrong tells his story in a book: *It's Not about the Bike: My Journey Back to Life*.

At the end of his "year of hell," he received a clean bill of health and decided to try to resume his cycling career. Even weakened by his ordeal, Armstrong was still a formidable competitor. So he started to train, but it did not go well. Cycling organizations and teams thought he was through and didn't want him. Corporate sponsors were reluctant to sign up again. But the real problem was deeper, located somewhere in his heart. When he entered his first race in eighteen months, he finished fourteenth. It didn't feel right. He entered the Paris–Nice race, an eight-day ordeal. On the first day, riding in 35-degree weather with wind and rain, feeling miserable and full of self-doubt, he did something absolutely unprecedented: he quit. He straightened up in the seat, coasted to the curb, took off his number, went back to his apartment, packed up, and returned to Austin, Texas—embarrassed, humiliated, and miserable. He spent his days playing golf, water skiing, watching television, eating Tex-Mex, drinking beer, feeling depressed, and making his significant other and friends miserable too. "I wanted to escape and that is what I did," he writes.

The people closest to him, the ones who weren't about to give up on him—or allow him to give up on himself—convinced him to try one more time, to enter the U.S. Pro Championship in Pennsylvania. Armstrong agreed

reluctantly and decided to train in the mountains of western North Carolina, near the town of Boone, where he had trained and competed successfully before. He worked morning, afternoon, and evening—devoted himself totally—and slowly began to recover physically, but more importantly, spiritually.

Let me read a brief except of his own account:

> We rode in the rain every day. The cold seared my lungs, and with every breath I blew out a stream of white frost, but I didn't mind. It made me feel clean. . . . Toward the end we decided to ride Beech Mountain: a strenuous 5,000 ft. climb. There was a time when I owned that mountain. It had been the crucial stage in my two Tour du Pont victories. I remembered laboring up the mountainside with crowds lined up along the route, and how they had painted my name across the road: "Go Armstrong." . . . We set out on a 100-mile loop before the ascent of Beech Mountain. We road through a steady rain for a few hours. As I started up the rise, I saw an eerie sight: the road still had my name painted on it: "Viva Lance." I continued upward and the mountain grew steeper. I picked up the pace . . . heard my breath grow shorter and accelerated. That ascent triggered something in me. As I continued upward, I saw my life as a whole—I saw the pattern and privilege of it, and the purpose of it, too. It was simply this: I was meant for a long, hard climb. (pp.182-197)

Deciding what to do with your life is the most important decision you will ever make. There are literally libraries of books on the subject and legions of advisors and consultants, all the way from school career counselors to very sophisticated experts with batteries of sophisticated tests. A book review in the *New York Times* last week caught my eye: *What Should I Do with My Life?* I had the title first! Popular author Po Bronson has made a career interviewing, writing, and consulting on what he calls the "ultimate question": finding your niche. Bronson documents the pain and trauma that surround the decision for many people, the fact that lots of people never get it down finally and continue, all their lives, to search for the right job. Sometimes it is so stressful that it becomes paralyzing, and fear of making the wrong choice leaves the seeker sitting on the couch watching television and going to therapy.

All of which came to mind as I thought this week about one of the best stories in the Bible—in fact, one of the best short stories in all of literature: the story of Jonah. Everyone knows a little bit about it. It's a very old story. It was written about 400 years before Jesus, and the author puts the story in a time about 400 years before that. Jonah hears a voice telling him to go to Nineveh, the hated and feared capital of Assyria, which was not only the

home of a lot of hated Assyrians, but which also had a reputation for being the sin-city of the whole area.

Jonah's response is to board the next ship for Tarshish, which happens to be a port city on the coast of Spain—about as far away from Nineveh as he can go. The psalmists' lovely phrase, "If I take the wings of the morning and settle at the farthest limits of the sea" was exactly what Jonah had in mind.

What God wanted Jonah to do was go to Nineveh with a simple but blunt message: "Change your ways or you're in for a lot of trouble." Instead of obeying, Jonah heads out in the opposite direction. Then comes a storm at sea, a wonderful exchange between the ship's crew and Jonah (in which the sailors exhibit a lot more moral integrity than Jonah), the decision to throw Jonah overboard, and the large fish that swallows Jonah. What follows is even better. Jonah is in the belly of the big fish for three days, composes and prays an eloquent prayer, and is spewed out on dry land. God speaks a second time, and this time Jonah obeys, for obvious reasons, and he delivers the message to Nineveh. And to everyone's surprise and Jonah's consternation, the inhabitants of Nineveh repent. The story ends enigmatically with Jonah sulking, disappointed that Nineveh was spared. I will return to that part next Sunday. For today, let's focus for a while on this matter of Jonah deciding what to do and what not to do with the rest of his life.

First, about the voice. It is not in any way an objective fact, but my sense is that the vast majority of us have never heard a voice clearly telling us what to do with our lives. In fact, the story doesn't say a voice at all, but "the word of the Lord came to Jonah," which is a different matter altogether, the word of the Lord being a lot more subtle and nuanced than a voice.

Some suggest that God gets our attention by giving us gifts to use—skills, capacities, competencies—and that to discover those gifts and put them to use is to know your vocation, your calling. Elizabeth O'Connor is one who thinks a lot about locating your calling, your purpose, by locating, understanding, and refining your gifts. O'Connor is helpful in her observation that to say yes to one gift, one possibility, is to say no to others, perhaps many others. Sometimes that's easy, and sometimes it's not.

And another clue, an important one, is passion. Kenny Rogers said that his mother told him early on to find something he loved to do and he would never have to work a day in his life (see Derrick Bell, *Ethical Ambition*, p. 24). Perhaps the happiest set of circumstances in the world happens when you can earn a living doing what you love to do, what you are passionate about. Kenny Rogers, for instance. Tampa Bay Buccaneer's defensive tackle Warren Sapp, for instance, who will play in the Super Bowl later today and do what he is enormously gifted to do and who said last Tuesday, "What's

not to like about this? It's almost utopia here . . . the perfect place. . . . We're playing a kid's game and getting a king's ransom."

Sometimes it comes together, and sometimes—maybe mostly—for one reason or another, it does not. Sometimes you can earn a living—in Warren Sapp's case, earn a lot of money—by using your gifts and doing what you love most to do. But sometimes you have to make a different decision to earn a lot less money to do what you most love to do. Derrick Bell, Professor of Law at NYU, was the first African American to teach on the faculty of the Harvard Law School, quit in protest over the university's failure to be more proactive in hiring practices, and still came out on top. But sometimes it doesn't work that way. Sometimes you have to make real sacrifices to do what you want to do. Bell observes that people who work for social reform generally work longer hours and make less than their counterparts in business. And sometimes, Bell observes, you simply can't do what you love to do and are gifted to do. He writes, "It is not a betrayal of ethical ambition when the circumstances require that you remain in a job or relationship that's not very rewarding. Duty to family, to children, to elderly parents, even to an employer, may mandate remaining in a job with little future and even less satisfaction" (p. 12). Many of us grew up in homes where both our parents worked at jobs they did not like at all, jobs they occasionally hated, but kept at it all their lives, for us, essentially. I grew up in a home like that. Sometimes you have to work at a job that you do not love, a job you may even dislike, in order to afford to do what you love to do.

History is changed by individuals who experience and listen to their passion. Mamie Till Mobley, who died two weeks ago, listened to her passion, her anger, and her grief when her son Emmett was brutally murdered in 1955 while visiting relatives in Money, Mississippi. When his mutilated and brutalized body was returned to Chicago, Mrs. Mobley decided on an open casket for the funeral so "the world can see what they did to my son." Thousands of people filed past Emmett's open casket in a South Side Chicago church, and millions suddenly knew what racism looked like. The two men who did it were indicted and tried in a segregated court before an all-white jury and acquitted. And then three months later, another African American woman, Rosa Parks, angry about Emmett Till and inspired by his mother's courageous decision, listened to her passion and her tired feet and refused to get up out of her seat and go to the back of the bus in Montgomery, Alabama—and the rest is history.

And one day, 2000 years ago, two fishermen, working at their trade, heard a man's voice saying, "Follow me," and they did it, dropped their nets and followed. Then it happened again: two fishermen mending their nets in their father's boat; "Follow me"; and they left their father in the boat and followed him. It doesn't say they never fished again. They probably did, but

in that decision, that commitment, four men—Simon and Andrew, James and John—changed the course of human history.

How did you decide to do what you do? How will decide what to do with the rest of your life, however much of it you have left to live? “How did you decide to be a minister?” people sometimes ask me, and they want to hear, I think, that there was a bolt of flashing light and a clear voice with a set of instructions or, at the very least, a still, small voice, just a whisper perhaps, and are disappointed to learn that it wasn’t that way at all. Instead it was like the decisions most of make about our lives: not clear and clean at all, but something of a struggle actually, ambiguous, with other possibilities, with the painful necessity of saying no to other options, a decision finally made on the basis of something indescribable, an intellectual curiosity, and a final deep sense that I—we—none of us ever finds out what it is or is supposed to be until after listening, praying, worrying, struggling, and finally we make a decision, a commitment, and give ourselves to it and are content with occasional certainty even after.

At the time when it was necessary to make that decision, when it could no longer be delayed or avoided, when there was no convenient, slow boat to Tarshish, I happened on Dag Hammarskjold’s personal diary, *Markings*. Hammarskjold was Secretary General of the United Nations and lost his life in a plane crash while on a peace mission in Africa. He was a kind of mystic Christian, and on Whitsunday 1961, he wrote:

> I don’t know who or what put the question, I don’t know when it was put. I don’t even remember answering. But at some moment, I did answer “yes” to someone or something—and from that hour I was certain that existence is meaningful and that, therefore my life, in self-surrender, had a goal. (p. 205)

Perhaps the most important part of the Jonah story is that God didn’t give up, even when Jonah refused the invitation and tried to get as far away as he could from God’s call. God kept at it. There was nowhere that Jonah could go that God would forget about him and let him go.

> Where can I go from your spirit?
> Or where can I flee from your presence?
> If I ascend to heaven, you are there:
> If I make my bed in hell, you are there.
> If I take the wings of the morning
> And settle at the farthest limits of the sea,
> even there your hand shall hold me fast.

And so you and I can fully expect God to continue to follow us, no matter where we go, or what we are doing, no matter where we wander or go to

avoid and escape. So you and I can fully expect the call to come: “Follow me.”

Lance Armstrong remembers:

> I was meant for a long, hard climb. I approached the summit. Behind me in the car, Chris could see . . . that I was having a change of heart. Some weight, he sensed, was no longer there.
>
> I reached the top of the mountain. I cruised to a halt. Chris looked at me and said, “I’ll put the bike on top of the car.”
>
> “No,” I said. “Give me my rain jacket. I’m riding back.”
>
> I was restored. I was a bike racer again.
>
> I passed the rest of the trip in near reverence for those beautiful, peaceful mountains. The rides were demanding and quiet, and I rode with a pure love of the bike, until Boone began to feel like the Holy Land. . . . I got my life back on those rides.

Amen.

Prayers of the People
By John Cairns, Dean, Academy for Faith and Life

O God of Light, wellspring of inexhaustible energy, exuberance, and love, we are here because our hope is dulled by the never-ending sound of conflicting voices ringing in our ears. Our vision is clouded by the unrestrained collage of images that pass before our eyes. Come near and help us, we pray. Lift the scales from our eyes, that we may see clearly the glory of your creation so often hidden by our personal agendas. Silence any voice but your own, that we may find in you the source of righteousness and truth. Give us fresh energy to be your glad and faithful people in these trying times.

We lift before you today our world, teetering on the brink of war in one place after another. May rationality and negotiation open channels for reconciliation where none now appear. May voices and energies directed toward peace persuade those who see no course but conflict. We pray particularly for those who will gather tomorrow at the United Nations to hear the report of the weapons inspectors. We lift up as well our president and his advisors as he prepares to address the nation. And we pray for the leaders of all the nations of the world, that they may find the personal resolve and public encouragement to act in ways that will de-escalate the

crises that threaten them, their nations, and all people. Lead us, O God, in paths of peace.

Ever-present Spirit, you call us with strong nudges and gentle whispers to proceed on a path you stretch out before us. May we find the courage to follow your leading, attentive to your intentions for our lives. Enable us to be beacons of light in this darkened world, so that because of our witness others might be led to you. Let us not be afraid to be “followers”; help us to claim a greater sense of your justice and righteousness, that the world may know the better way you have shown us in Jesus Christ.

O Good Shepherd, gather into your arms all those who have wandered away from your love. Let them know that they may always find safety within your sheltering arms. We also lift up all who have been wounded or grieved in the course of their daily round. Tend to their brokenness; bring healing and wholeness where none now exists. Gracious God, we feel so inadequate in the face of human hurt and need. Help each of us to find ways of extending your care, offering your forgiveness, sharing your love. Direct our living that our lives may be of service to you and useful to our neighbors, for we pray in the strong name of Jesus Christ, our Lord; who taught us when we pray together to say, Our Father . . .